

Where Is That Music Coming From? On Yvonne Rainer's *The Concept of Dust*, or How do you look when there's nothing left to move?

by Soyoung Yoon

For authentic memories, it is far less important that the investigator report on them than he mark, quite precisely, the site where he gained possession of them.

Walter Benjamin, *Excavation and Memory*, ca. 1932¹

At the start of the performance *The Concept of Dust*, or *How do you look when there's nothing left to move?*, we hear a curious account of an ancient hedgehog. The first of a number of spoken texts interspersed throughout the performance, the text describes a paleontologist's discovery in north-central British Columbia of "the fossil of an ancient hedgehog just two inches long, no bigger than a shrew."² The tiny, fragile set of bones, cradled in the paleontologist's palm, accumulates in a mere two inches an almost ungraspable passage of time: 52 million years. The fossil also functions as an index to radical changes of climate, to global warming and environmental crises, a reminder of when this region of Canada was once a tropical rain forest. As the paleontologist states—and Yvonne Rainer quotes—the study of such bones "could give us a better idea about what is happening today if the Earth continues to warm."³ The fossil, then, is poignant and comic evidence that barely registers as evidence; it is a faint signal of what the writer Rob Nixon has recently characterized as the "slow violence" of environmental crises.⁴ The sense of this "slow motion urgency" is echoed in the music that accompanies the movements of the dancers: Gavin Bryars's *The Sinking of the Titanic* (c.1969).⁵ Bryars's score is a drawn-out, seemingly interminable repetition of the Christian hymn "Nearer, My God, to Thee," which was famously played by the RMS Titanic's band in the last moments of the ship's sinking, from 2:15 to 2:20 a.m. Through repetition the hymn becomes a low-level, continuous siren, a sonic mass of pensive sadness, anxiety, and melancholy. In his own writing about the score, Bryars asked, what if the band continued playing, under water, on the seabed, "repeating over and over until the ship returns to the surface and the sounds re-emerge?"⁶

Later in *The Concept of Dust*, Rainer wonders aloud, matter-of-factly and as an aside, "Where is that music coming from?"

Where is that music coming from? Who or what is speaking, from where, from when? *The Concept of Dust* presents what Rainer describes as a "busy field of vision."⁷ Referring back to her *Continuous Project—Altered Daily* (1970), the new performance is structured by indeterminacy: the sequencing of particular dance components is indeterminate, decided during the performance by the dancers themselves, forming disparate and scattered movements that now and again come together in grouped configurations.

And the work is full of faint signals, like that from the hapless hedgehog—from dancers' movements and gestures, spoken texts, musical sequences, a piano tuning, or a painting. The aim of this essay is to amplify these signals, to bring to the fore their faintness, their quality—and the conditions of their increasing imperceptibility. The fossil becomes a faint signal of environmental crisis, imbued with its "slow-motion urgency," if there is the technology, the knowledge, the will to receive it. Otherwise, it's just a bone. What is at stake is to show the *extent* of the distance traveled from a signal's emission to its reception. How far have you traveled to reach me here? And what do you want of me? Between here and elsewhere, it could be a distance of 52 million years. Or, it could be the distance between the dancer and the dance.



Compare the fossil, the weight of its evidence, with that of the spoken texts that follow it, culled from wall texts of The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Islamic art collection. The texts are read by Rainer or by dancers who, from time to time, in between movements, find a microphone and a page thrust in front of them. The audience catches fragments of the beginning of the Muslim calendar in 622; the founding of the new capital of Baghdad, the "City of Peace," in 762; the rise and fall of various dynasties—the Abbasid, the Samanid, the Seljuk; and the cosmopolitan fusion of influences from Asia to Europe that contributed to the richness and far reach of Islamic cultural life. The Islamic art itself is absent. The "out-of-placeness" of the quotations is redoubled by the fact of recent history, as we are compelled to reflect on the continued razing of that cultural heritage and the United States' implication in that destruction. Like the thrust of the microphone and page, I find myself recalling the past decade's destruction of museums, libraries, archeological sites—and peoples—from the Iraq War to more current news from Iraq and Syria (Mosul, Nimrud, Hatra...).

“When statues die, they enter art. This botany of death is what we call culture.”⁸ In their 1953 film *Statues Also Die*, Alain Resnais and Chris Marker spoke about the mortality of statues: how an artwork dies when the society that supported it is lost or destroyed, when it is severed from “the living glance” that rendered it both meaningful and unsettling.⁹ For the filmmakers, the “botany of death” on view in African art collections at the British Museum, Musée du Congo Belge [Royal Museum for Central Africa], and Musée de L’Homme is part and parcel of the effects of European colonization, a mission not so much of civilization as of mass destruction of one civilization for another, through the twinned violence of the military and the market. (For its indictment of colonial violence, the film would be banned until the end of the French-Algerian War.) Throughout the film, the camera seeks to make present the life lost. In a noted sequence, an accelerating succession of close ups of art-works crescendoes into the knowing smile of an African diver, who breaks the surface of the water from which he re-emerges—“an overflow of imagination,” now become animate by the film’s camera.¹⁰

From our position within the fourth-floor exhibition space of The Museum of Modern Art, where Rainer’s performance takes place, we might also sense this mortality of an artwork, “see” the persistence of life lost in Henri Rousseau’s painting *The Sleeping Gypsy* (1897). For the performance, Rainer and a group of art handlers have temporarily installed the painting upstage and stage right, next to the entrance of one of the galleries. In the painting, history is reified into myth, the ravages of colonial violence stilled into the hushed vulnerability of the sleeping gypsy, her fatigue, the dream of her deep sleep; Rousseau calls her “the Negress.”¹¹ She sleeps on the now-cool desert surface, under the moonlit sky, with one arm bent as a makeshift pillow, the other firmly holding onto her walking stick. And there is the lion. For Rousseau, who never left France, but rather painted jungles and deserts from the gardens of Paris during the feverish height of the European colonial conquest of the African continent (the so-called “Scramble for Africa”), sleep is the world of the Other, of poetry, where “a lion chances to pass by, picks up her scent yet does not devour her.”¹² As another entry into *The Concept of Dust*, Rainer stages a *tableau vivant* of sorts: at several points throughout the performance, a dancer examines the painting, then lies on a mat beneath it, approximating the gypsy’s gesture, before “waking up” to resume dancing. Downstage right, a female dancer in the costume of the gypsy smiles broadly at the audience, waiting for Rainer to thrust the first text in front of her face. As the performance progresses, the painting is slowly, carefully towed by art handlers across and off the stage. The mat remains as both a reminder and a place of rest for the dancers to take a break, to survey the field, to (re)find their place among the others.



Are we performers the gypsies and you the lion? In a written statement handed out at the MoMA performance, Rainer proposes an exercise of comparisons between the painting of *The Sleeping Gypsy* and the bodies of the aging dancers beneath it: “Which is worth more? Who values which? Who values which more?”¹³ The problem here is not about which value, either aesthetic or economic, by which one would compare the bodies on display. The problem, rather, is the very possibility of such a comparison between the painted and the living—the condition that allows for this comparison to take place. Rainer’s proposal is in part motivated by a renewed vogue for dance in museums. In current debates, a critical point of the unease around this (re)alliance between the performing and visual arts has been the value of the performer. How is the work of the performer valued? How is it differentiated from the work of the artist or the artwork? And what of the very *invisibility* of the performer’s work, especially in relation to the hyper-visibility of the performer’s *body*?

Resnais and Marker had offered a scenario in which statues die. Shorn of their “living glance,” artworks become objects of curiosity, collecting dust (and “value”). Rainer offers a conundrum of the present where the performer’s body takes the place of those statues: “living things,” bodies become “mere” material, like stone, wood, or clay.¹⁴ Her work poses a particular problem about the recontextualization of dance in the museum: the objectification and abstraction of the dancer’s body, the body abstracted to brute, mute matter. It is a problem intensified in the sight of the body at rest, the body presumably not at work, “doing nothing,” the sleeping body. “But in this age of chronically frustrated desires do you want to see more than a painting of a sleeping gypsy? Do you want more than the body of a sleeping dancer? Do you want to touch her? Do you want to test her, feel her?”¹⁵

How can we know the dancer from the dance? In 1974, Annette Michelson turned to William Butler Yeats’s famous line to underscore the importance of Rainer’s new dance from the 1960s.¹⁶ In works such

as *Trio A* (1966), through their new economy of movement, Rainer proposed a demystification of dance for the body at work, that is, to “stand, walk, run, eat, carry bricks, show movies, or move or be moved by some thing, rather than oneself.”¹⁷ Her work critiqued the spectacle of the dancer’s body for “a more matter-of-fact, more concrete, more banal quality of physical being in performance.”¹⁸ The dancer exists neither before nor beyond the dance; what is significant is not the dancer’s charisma or persona, but her movements—“what one does.”¹⁹ As Marx wrote of the work of the body, of labor, “labor is the living, form-giving fire; it is the transitoriness of things, their temporality, as their formation by living time.”²⁰ How then to comprehend the fact, the experience, that “in this age of chronically frustrated desires,” it seems it is not enough to see what a body does, but that one needs to test the body, feel it, perhaps even nudge it, poke it, kick it, to see if “it” is real, if it is alive?²¹ What of the dancer and the dance?

In *The Concept of Dust*, there is a recurring dance movement called “the crush,” a literal articulation of the definition: “the crowding together of things, or especially persons, so that they press forcibly upon each other.”²² A crush also refers to “pressure that bruises, breaks down, injures, or destroys.”²³ A crush is also an infatuation. The dancers close in on and around each other, pushing up or against the other, creating a tightly compressed configuration, a scrimmage that buckles a step or two. The crush relaxes into a briefly held huddle or suddenly discharges a graceful sweep of an arm, a neat tip of the hand, or a squat and a wry grin. It is not clear if the dancers serve as either blocks or butresses—or both—for such discharges of movement. To paraphrase the old lightbulb joke: “how many dancers does it take to make a dance?”

The crux here, I would argue, is the continued atrophy of the body’s capacity to signify, to *mean*: the atrophy of the *language* of the body for the mute matter of the body as such, measured by their number, their mass, their duration, or by categories of population. This atrophy occurs in tandem not only with the rise of technologies of surveillance and control that are ever-more dependent on biometric identification, on the capture and codification of behavioral and affective tendencies, but also with the decrease in the value of living labor. I am reminded of Maria Fernandes, the part-time worker who dreamed of working not three minimum-wage jobs but two, who “dreamed of sleeping, really sleeping, for six or seven hours at a stretch”; her body and its needs become visible at the extremity of exhaustion.²⁴ It is another turn of the screw in the long history of abstraction of bodies, of the “mattering” of which bodies and where.

In *The Concept of Dust*, the question of the invisibility of the performers’ work—and its coupling with the hyper-visibility of the performer’s body—is picked up and woven through larger, more expansive inquiries

posed through sporadic interruptions by spoken texts. Through these texts, we hear of the effects of the sublimation of the body: the aesthetic disavowals of the havoc of love and sex, illness and death; and how this “high art sexlessness” is intertwined with politics, ideology, war.²⁵ What is the price of this disavowal, this refusal to see, to sustain a sight, to remember? A line is gleaned from a poet’s amazement at the early summer beauty of a world that had forgotten its holocausts: “World, the little children were thrown like butterflies, wings beating to the flames.”²⁶ And it is juxtaposed by Rainer with an excerpt from the diary of a Nazi SS doctor, where lengthy, detailed entries about “an excellent Sunday dinner” sit side by side with laconic entries of “attendance at special action,” as he describes his participation in the gas chambers.²⁷ What to do, then, with “the old, well-known problem of the ‘blind-spot’”?²⁸ How do we live with these blind spots, these obstructions of reception, and their necessity for the status quo, their seeming inevitability? “But one day it will all collapse, if we don’t face reality,” we hear a writer ask. “Yes, well,” her companion answers, “sooner or later.”²⁹



Against the dense aural fog of *The Sinking of The Titanic*, the dancers come and go in a dynamic that evokes the rhythms of children’s playgrounds, the ebb and flow, the concentration and dispersion. In particular, there is an oft-repeated dance movement that involves the use of a pillow in a game of tag. The rule of the game is that whoever is tagged by the pillow must stop moving and slowly fall, with the pillow in tow. As if the pillow were a powerful magnet, whatever part of the body it touches must also be the first point of contact with the floor—be it the seat of the bottom, the side of the waist, the chest, the back of the head or even the forehead. As one falls, one forms a peculiar shape, both funny and sad. And one does not fall alone. It is a contradictory movement in which the pillow is both magnet and cushion. The “It” pulls you down and carries you, bearing your weight, cradling your fall, in a tackle that is also an embrace. It is a forceful, momentary arrest of movement that compels you to

rest, to take care of yourself, that takes care of you.

Regarding such arrests of movement, in a forthcoming essay about *The Concept of Dust*, Rainer underscores a new element—or rather dimension—of movement, that of the “doing nothing.”³⁰ “Doing nothing” consists of getting out of the way for another dancer, standing to one side, sitting in a chair or cross-legged on the floor, catching one’s breath, watching each other. This is an attentive, even active pausing that seems to belie the presumed passivity of “doing nothing.” It is an action that crosses the divide between activity and passivity, a something between something and nothing. And it is this “doing nothing” that girds the structured indeterminacy of the dance, modulating the pace of its contractions and dilations. “As spectators, we are witnessing autonomous lives that do not preclude the possibility of cooperation and mutual aid.”³¹ We can compare how Rainer’s choreography incorporates the sidelines, a space to retire to and to return from; recall the aforementioned mat upstage and stage right. And if the sidelines are visible, they are rendered visible as sidelines, as asides, as nothing—the constitutive work of the sidelines.

In *History and Obstinacy* (1981), a voluminous, sprawling account of the development of living labor, Alexander Kluge and Oskar Negt discuss the figure of a female welder who adds an extra movement, a backward sweep of her arms “in a winglike fashion,” to her piecemeal labor of welding at a repetitive cycle of nine seconds. “She does not have to exert herself in order to operate the machine,” they insist, “she must exert herself in order to endure this abstraction.”³² For Kluge and Negt, her winglike movement is a mark of obstinacy, not a residue of past habits but a habit created anew in dialectical relation to the abstract, alienating character of her labor, a habit that barely registers as habit—a tic or quirk that allows her to continue. From the point of view of the factory owner or manager who oversees the assembly line, the winglike movement is nothing. But for the welder, it is something between nothing and something, a something that allows her to continue moving.

Rainer says an aside: “Comes over one the absolute necessity to move.”³³

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Text edited by Thomas J. Lax and Jason Persse.

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The performance is made possible by MoMA’s Wallis Annenberg Fund for Innovation in Contemporary Art through the Annenberg Foundation.

Yvonne Rainer: The Concept of Dust, or How do you look when there’s nothing left to move? is co-commissioned by Performa, New York, and The Getty, Los Angeles. Organized by The Museum of Modern Art.

The artist gratefully acknowledges RoseLee Goldberg, Esa Nikkle, and Franck Bordese, Performa; Laurel Kishi and the Getty Museum; Glenn Phillips and the Getty Research Institute; and the Gibney Dance Center, New York.

Special thanks to Jill and Peter Kraus.

- 1 Walter Benjamin, "Excavation and Memory" in *Selected Writings, Volume 2: 1927–1934*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005): 576, "Epic and rhapsodic in the strictest sense, genuine memory must therefore yield an image of the person who remembers, in the same way a good archaeological report not only informs us about the strata from which its findings originate, but also gives an account of the strata which first had to be broken through."
- 2 Sindya N. Bhanoo, "Fossil: A 52-Million-Year-Old Window Into the Future." *The New York Times*, July 15, 2014
- 3 Jaeyln Eberle, quoted in *Ibid.*
- 4 Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011)
- 5 *Ibid.* for "slow motion urgency"
- 6 Gavin Bryars, *The Sinking of the Titanic* http://www.gavinbryars.com/Pages/titanic_point.html, accessed May 31, 2015
- 7 Yvonne Rainer, "DOING NOTHING / NOTHIN' DOIN'!: Revisiting a Minimalist Approach to Performance," *PAJ*, forthcoming
- 8 *Les Statues meurent aussi*. 1953. France. Directed by Alain Resnais, Chris Marker. Tadié-Cinéma Production
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 *Ibid.* for "overflow of imagination."
- 11 Gallery label for Henri Rousseau, *The Sleeping Gypsy*, New York, Museum of Modern Art; see also: http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object_id=80172, accessed May 31, 2015
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 Yvonne Rainer, "Some Random Ruminations on Value," for performance of *The Concept of Dust, or How do you look when there's nothing left to move?* at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, June 2015. Rainer wrote this statement as an initial response to Ralph Lemon's invitation to participate in the project *Value Talks* at MoMA in 2013–14. The essay was to be accompanied by a performance in which Rainer would go to sleep beneath Rousseau's *The Sleeping Gypsy* in the gallery where it was hung. The performance was canceled after Rainer realized its proximity to a performance by Tilda Swinton at MoMA in 2013, *The Maybe*, a reformulated staging of an earlier collaborative work between Swinton and Cornelia Parker at the Serpentine Gallery in London in 1995. In *The Maybe*, Swinton sleeps in a glass vitrine. In 1995, Swinton's performance took place over seven days, eight hours a day, as part of Parker's installation, included among a series of glass vitrines of "relics" (such as Sigmund Freud's blanket). In 2013, the performance was staged alone, with the following gallery label: "*The Maybe* 1993/2013: Living artist, glass, steel, mattress, pillow, linen, water and spectacles." Regarding the latter, MoMA released the following statement: "An integral part of *The Maybe*'s incarnation at MoMA in 2013 is that there is no published schedule for its appearance, no artist's statement released, no museum statement beyond this brief context, no public profile or image issued. Those who find it chance upon it themselves, live and in real—shared—time: now we see it, now we don't."
- 14 *Ibid.* for "living things."
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 Annette Michelson, "Yvonne Rainer, Part One: The Dancer and the Dance" *Artforum* 12, no. 5 (January 1974): 57–63
- 17 Yvonne Rainer, "The Mind Is a Muscle," in *A Woman Who...: Essays, Interviews, Scripts* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999): 33
- 18 *Ibid.*
- 19 *Ibid.*, 32.
- 20 Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (London and New York: Penguin, 1973): 361
- 21 See Rainer, "Some Random Ruminations on Value"
- 22 Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd ed., s.v. "crush"
- 23 *Ibid.*
- 24 Rachel Swarns, "For a Worker With Little Time Between 3 Jobs, a Nap Has Fatal Consequences." *The New York Times*, September 29, 2014
- 25 Harold Brodkey, "Dying: An Update." *The New Yorker*, February 7, 1994: 71
- 26 Nelly Sachs, "When in early summer," in *Collected Poems 1944–1949*, trans. Michal Hamburger, Ruth and Matthew Mead, and Michael Roloff (Kobenhavn and Los Angeles: Green Integer Books, 2011): 325
- 27 Johann Paul Kremer, "Diary" in *KL Auschwitz Seen by the SS*, by Rudolf Hass, Pery Broad, and Kremer, trans. Kristen Michelin (Auschwitz-Berkenau State Museum, Oswiecim. 1995): 161–165
- 28 Christa Wolf, *City of Angels or, The Overcoat of Dr. Freud*, trans. Damián Searls (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013): 78
- 29 *Ibid.*
- 30 Rainer, "DOING NOTHING / NOTHIN' DOIN'!"
- 31 Yvonne Rainer, "Where's the Passion? Where's the Politics? Or, How I Became Interested in Impersonating, Approximating, and End Running around My Selves and Where Do I Look When You're Looking at Me?" *Theater* 40 (2010): 51
- 32 Alexander Kluge and Oskar Negt, *History & Obstinacy*, trans. Richard Langston et al (New York: Zone Books, 2014): 134. See Devin Fore's introduction, *ibid.*, 24. See also footnote 19, *ibid.*, 487: Kluge and Negt are referencing Marianne Herzog's *From Hand to Mouth: Women and Piecework* (1980): "To be able to go on like this Frau Heinrich has extended her movements over the years, within the limits of piecework. She has invented a few additional movements, but still manages to get through the required amount of work. She doesn't simply pick up the materials and weld them together beneath the electrode. If you watch her you see that she spreads out her arms as if she were flying, draws them together and picks up the materials with both hands as if she had come upon them by pure chance. As she does this she rocks backwards and forwards, treads on the foot pedal three or four times, and only then welds the first part. Then out go the arms again. Frau Heinrich uses all of this to help her get through her piecework, otherwise it would be a superfluous movement and she couldn't afford it." Herzog, 55–56
- 33 D. H. Lawrence, *Sea and Sardinia*, ed. Mara Kalnins (London and New York: Penguin, 1999): 7
- Image credits: Henri Rousseau. *The Sleeping Gypsy*. 1897. Oil on canvas. Gift of Mrs. Simon Guggenheim; Yvonne Rainer. *Trio A*. 1978. 16mm film (black and white, silent), 10 min.; Yvonne Rainer. 2014. Photographer: Adrienne Chevrot. Courtesy of the artist